

Relevance Rewarded: ‘Louie, the Fly’ Turns 50

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Abstract

Marketing often relies on dazzling experiential, visual and auditory advertising images to brand and persuasively promote products. The purpose of this paper is to undertake a critical experiential, visual and auditory analysis of the ‘Louie the Fly’ imagery, given the central role of these types of images in marketing communications. The analysis of the ‘Louie the Fly’ imagery used in Mortein’s® advertisements found that although the imagery had been modified during the life of the campaign to meet changing consumer expectations brought about by technological advances, the fundamental thematic imagery conveyed a strong persuasive message to consumers through all the campaigns. The central character, Louie, has retained his appeal during his 50 year lifespan. ‘Louie the Fly’ advertisements have successfully used contextually effective imagery to achieve brand recognition for Mortein®.

Introduction

Effective marketing often relies on strong imagery (Schroeder, 2006). Many notable characters have been created by marketers; namely Santa Claus, Chesty Bond, Redhead matches girl, the Coco Pops Monkey and more recent, M&M men and Mr Reach. In Australia, the most notable is a character whose image is associated with dirt and ‘the great unclean’ (Mortein, n.d.). Despite the unlikely appeal of the imagery, few characters have maintained their relevance and stood the test of time as well as the Mortein® character, ‘Louie the Fly’. The promotion was recently selected by the Advertising Federation of Australia as one of the top thirty best television commercials to screen in Australia since television began in 1956 (Dasey, 2006).

Since the first ‘Louis the Fly’ television commercial appeared 50 years ago, visual, auditory and experiential ‘Fly’ imagery have combined in a succession of Mortein’s® marketing campaigns. Louie’s first appearance in 1957 was the forerunner of the 1962 Louie, who then evolved into the 1986 Louie, followed by a 1995, 1999 and a 2000 version (Mortein, n.d.). While technological advances during the intervening years between the first animated cartoon campaign and the more recent 2000 campaign have allowed the evolution and presentation of more sophisticated imagery, the marketing message delivered by ‘Louie’ has remained the same. This consistency removed risk for both the marketer and consumer (Morgan and Hunt 1994). With over 90 percent of Australians recognising ‘Louie the Fly’ and associating both character and jingle with the brand name Mortein® (Mortein, n.d.), Louie has proven to be one of the most permanent and engaging of Australian advertising images.

The theory associated with social learning models suggests that individual consumers develop behaviours and consumption-related attitudes through learning experiences (Martin and Bush, 2000). Marketing communications have to connect with consumers by creating imagery, as well as link ‘real’ experiences with which the target customer can relate. The purpose of this paper is to undertake a critical experiential, visual and auditory analysis of the ‘Louie the Fly’

imagery, given the central role of these types of images in advertising. The analysis makes an important contribution to understanding the effect and relevance of contextualised branding imagery.

Advertising

Advertising this 21st Century has changed since the 1950s, becoming progressively more complex, technical, open-ended and layered to reach an increasingly diverse and more sophisticated audience. Consumers recognize the brand via imagery and characters, such as 'Louie the Fly' (Mortein, n.d.) delivering the message. A larger worldwide marketplace, increasing amounts of advertising are gaining more impact and have more cut through ability (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver, 2004). Therefore the ability of the unclean Louie to maintain brand relevance in this changing advertising environment commands respect and investigation. Marketing messages that have an unconventional interpretation are taking over from the traditional hard sell/persuasive method of the past. Advertising appeals can be deliberately ambiguous. It could even be stated that a form of post-modern advertising has a disregard for conventional visual codes (Goldman, 1995). Consumers acquire meaning from visual cues rather than relying only on language-based translation of codes (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver, 2004). Postmodern advertising allows for vagueness, haziness and containing layers of meaning (Van Raaij, 1998). Thus, these types of messages allow for endless amounts of meanings. The humorous delivery by a cartoon character of a serious message in the Louie advertisements employs ambiguity to remove the potential for the advertisement to be socially confronting.

Marketers, influenced by reader-response theory, have adopted an open-meaning approach which allows for the co-creation of meaning; their audience create their own view (Ritson and Elliot, 1995). Social and individual characteristics in a cultural context mediate co-creational marketing. How consumers interpret meaning can be dependent on the actual use of the interpreted meaning and their individual, unique life experiences (Ritson and Elliot, 1995). With the use of 'non-commercial' messages such as those delivered by Louie the Fly to advertise products, consumers do not feel obliged to form an opinion or act in a certain manner; they are offered the freedom to choose how they wish to form their opinion. Thus, Ritson and Elliot (1995) argued that co-created advertisements produced a unique meaning for each person.

If advertising is being interpreted individually and in people's own unique way, it allows for meaning, value and relationships to be created and formed. Lannon and Cooper (1983) found that viewers formed a relationship that was both proactive and reactive. Because this approach is not the hard sell or push strategies used in other contemporary marketing communications, many consumers respond well to this method of advertising. Keeping brands strong is about understanding how customers form relationships with the brand and interpret the character of the brand (Baldinger, Blair and Exhambadi, 2002; Biel, 1997). The marketers of Mortein®, who use the individual interpretation strategy, report that they hold the number two market position worldwide in pest control (Reckitt-Benckiser, n.d.).

Branding

Brand promotion must bring about trust and credibility (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2004). Brand trust has an impact on the constructs of purchase and attitudinal loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Trust and commitment are two important relational variables that help partners in the relationship to keep preserving the relationship and to reduce 'the partners' risk of vulnerability to each other' (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Hacker, 2005). Mortein® has recognised their need to maintain Louie as the central character in successive advertisements in order to reduce risk for consumers and to preserve the relationship with existing consumers.

A company committed to developing brand trust is visionary; it possesses industry insight and uses truth to gain trust from internal and external audiences and to deliver what it promises, thereby enabling consistent progress (Collins and Porras, 1998; Ind, 2003). A model by Schultz and Schultz (1998) personifies this by showing that the process is no longer linear but constantly moving in and around the many participants in the market. What is also different about this model is that information being received by the consumer is not one way, but the consumer can contact the company and use various media on their own terms. Present day marketing communication uses familiar substance merged in an unconventional way in order to fascinate and tempt communities of audiences (Cova, 1997). Mortein® not only uses conventional television advertising to deliver its brand message but it also provides a web site through which all the Louie campaigns can be viewed (Mortein, n.d.).

As we move into the 21st Century, much importance has been placed on building brands and brand relationships to ensure long-term profitability (Kay, 2006; Pappu, Quester and Cooksey, 2005; Schoenbachler, Gordon and Aurand, 2004). Even though a brand has been previously successful, market share penetration and loyalty growth must continue to be secured (Baldinger, Blair, and Exhambadi, 2002; Ehrenberg, 1997). While many concepts of branding have very different antecedents and should be considered separately (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002), nonetheless brands create emotional and intellectual connections with all stakeholders. If a brand is strong, consumers see it as more vivid and possessing strong imagery (Biel 1997). With 90 percent of Australians recognising 'Louie the Fly' and associating the character and the jingle with the brand name, the marketers of Mortein® have built a strong brand.

Imagery

Marketing's paradigm shift and changing focus from techniques and concepts to viewing markets as a social construction has occurred (Penaloza and Venkatesh 2006). 'By connecting images to the cultural context of consumption, researchers gain a more thorough (yet never complete) understanding of how images embody and express cultural values and contradictions' (Schroeder 2006, p. 303). Interpretation of art or advertising begins with description (Schroeder, 2006) and includes subject matter, form, medium, colour, light, genre and articulation. Therefore, a critical visual, auditory and experiential analysis approach has been adopted to evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of 'Louie the Fly' imagery associated with Mortein's® brand identification. Developing an insight into how images embody and express cultural values in the Mortein® Louie campaigns can inform an understanding of marcoms located within an advertising framework.

From the time of its introduction in 1870 to the Australian market by its manufacturer, J. Hagemann, the name of Mortein® was associated with the image of death. The name,

Mortein®, an insecticidal powder, was derived from 'a combination of the French word 'mort' (dead) and the German 'ein' (one)' (Mortein, n.d.). Death was known to be linked to flies and cockroaches which were therefore regarded as a social evil, but the product offered a simple solution. The imagery embodied in the brand name conveyed the message that the product would kill the killers at the first attempt. Mortein® was distributed between the 1940s to the 1960s by the wholesale company of Samuel Taylor, whose managing director was Bill Graham. By this time Mortein® was a well established brand. When television went to air in Australia in 1956, Graham initiated the production of one of the first television commercials (TVC) to be shown in Australia in 1957. This lengthy infomercial linked the strong Mortein® brand name to the image of a cartoon character, 'Louie the Fly', who was created especially for this first TV commercial. Louie told household audiences that he was 'one of nature's deadliest killers. That's me, folk, Louis the fly' (Mortein, n.d.). The death imagery already associated with the brand name was reinforced by choosing an animated cartoon fly character (a carrier of deadly diseases) to deliver the visual, auditory and experiential advertising message in a contextually acceptable manner.

Cartoon animation allowed for the development of a socially recognizable personality, one with overtones of badness but still attractive in a raffish way. Selecting a speaking, animated fly for the main character in the campaign provided the opportunity for endless amounts of layered meanings to be associated with Mortein® being promoted by Louie. The unlikelihood of a fly speaking in syncopated rhythms evoking the image of a jazz-era gangster and the vagueness of the allusion to the basic primeval fear of death, permitted by this style of post-modern advertising, allowed for unconventional interpretations of the advertising message. Thus, the associated meanings for adults who have grown up with Louie the Fly may be that the house is free from flies. For youth, Louie may be interpreted as a cool dude. Consumers want links to their lifestyle and experience to give products emotional appeals (Leach, 2000). Post-modern communications for audiences must be designed to encourage questioning, being illusionary with superficial imagery (Proctor, Proctor, and Papasolomou-Doukakis, 2002). The Mortein® campaigns have met these requirements. Everyone has experienced the irritation caused by flies, but the embodiment of 'one of nature's deadliest killers' (Mortein, n.d.), as 'Louie the Fly', draws on superficial imagery to create an illusion with a humorous emotional appeal juxtaposed to the disgust and fear associated with consumers' experience of killers.

Post modern communication literature proposed that consumers have the tendency to value and highlight style as opposed to content (Firat and Schults, 1997). Louie's visual appeal has many layers. Research indicates that humans rank order of preference for hues with blue first and yellow last (Crozier, 1999). In recent campaigns the fly character, Louie, is an appealing bright blue, and he flies into the central position in the advertisement from a gloomy, dark, background that is broken into an unappealing yellow skyline. As the commercial unfolds Louie's commentary follows the visual imagery that progresses by showing black flies against a blue background meeting the lethal Mortein® droplets and dropping out of sight. The finale to the advertisement presents a picture of the can of Mortein® with a bright blue lid against a blue background, thereby utilizing the colour blue to attract us to the product. In the Louie campaigns, the use of colour cleverly reinforces the rest of the visual imagery that allows the audience to derive reassurance from the cues at the end of the advertisement when Louie and his party friends succumb to Mortein®. However, the style of their decease is not contextually challenging; they just drop out of sight. Through all the campaigns, Louie's behaviour, words and personality have conveyed the message that he is 'the bad guy' who

dies, but the cartoon animation and careful choice of words have removed any of the offensiveness of reality.

Accompanying visual cues in each of the Louie campaign finales is tactfully related auditory imagery. There is no articulation of the word death in the early campaigns, thereby observing the social taboo surrounding the use of this word: in 1957 Louie had 'met it'; by 1962 he was 'a victim of Mortein' and in 1986 it was 'bye, bye Louie'. From 1962 onwards the final words were delivered with a falling, mournful cadence. This cadence also employed alliteration, a playful poetic device, used to focus the hearer's attention on the brand name at the end of the auditory message through the use of repetition of the 'more' sound; 'more safe, more smart, Mortein'. The use of contextually considerate, but meaningful auditory imagery permitted additional layering of the meanings associated with the advertising message.

Conclusions and future research

Mortein® is a dynamic brand. It has achieved recognition by retaining in each of the advertising campaigns imagery that revolves around an appealing central character (Louie), who has repeatedly delivered a strong message (keep disease away by killing flies and other insects with Mortein®). However, subtle alterations to meet changing consumer expectations and maintain contextual relevance have been introduced into the imagery as each new campaign has replaced the previous campaign. Mortein® has more than a reputation and is more than an emblem; the environment has worked with Mortein's® advertising to maintain the brand's contextual relevance (Marken, 2001). The relevance has been holistically supported by the experiential, visual and auditory imagery employed in each of the advertising campaigns. Mortein's® branding has retained power by conveying that the product makes a positive contribution to individuals by offering a solution to a hygiene problem in a socially acceptable manner. Mortein® as a brand has achieved social acceptance and respectability through its skilful use of imagery (Clifton 2002).

We have drawn upon and expanded the theory of visual consumption (Schroeder, 2006) to include auditory and experiential consumption in order to show how visual, auditory and experiential representations inform culturally effective and relevant contemporary marketing images in Mortein's® 'Louie the Fly' advertising campaigns. This analysis of the 'Fly' campaigns finds that, although 'Louie' has grown and changed over the past 50 years, the imagery has maintained the relevance of its appeal through 'visual, historical and rhetorical presence and power' (Schroeder, 2006, p. 303). The brand value rests in the confidence and trust created by the imagery used in the advertising campaigns. This imagery does not violate the contextual values associated with death but provides a tactful, fast and confident solution to a cleanliness issue. Building on this analysis of 'Louie the Fly' advertising, future research needs to be undertaken to determine if there are variations in the way people of different chronological ages 'see' 'Louie the Fly'. Further, ascertaining variations of meanings and imagery from people of differing cultures and ethnic backgrounds of 'Louie the Fly' would be of interest. Limitations of this paper would be addressed by undertaking empirical research into both topics.

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LOUIE THE FLY

